

THE LOCAL HISTORIAN AND HIS SOURCES

Fifteen years ago Keith Sinclair, the author of what has become our best-known general history of New Zealand, said this:

Although [New Zealand] history has emerged from the stage of chronicles, it is nevertheless true that "histories" have preceded monographs. . . . The result is that there is scarcely an important "fact" or minor generalisation of New Zealand history which can stand without shame alongside the original sources. . . . A generation of pedants needs to toil at the definition of minutiae before we can have better histories than those we now possess.¹

It is indeed true that we have suffered from a surfeit of general histories; for many decades our typical history book has been the concise survey from Captain Cook to Don Clarke or from Tasman to the T.A.B., or, better still, from Dinornis Maximus to Golden Kiwi. Of late, however, New Zealand historians have responded to Sinclair's clarion call from One Tree Hill and although the 1950's saw the publication of no fewer than four general histories of New Zealand, nevertheless the pedants have been hard at work: a spate of monographs, articles, essays, edited journals, theses, biographies, institutional and local histories have poured from our printing presses to swell the New Zealand section in our libraries, to explode old Antipodean myths and to force us into re-evaluations of New Zealand's past.

As one historian among this generation of pedants my particular interest lies in the field of provincial, regional and local history. In this field we are not as well served as we might be. There were, as you doubtless know, six original provinces: Auckland, New Plymouth (Taranaki) and Wellington; Nelson, Canterbury and Otago. In the 1850's and 1860's four of these original provinces produced offspring—Hawke's Bay out of Wellington, Marlborough out of Nelson, the County and Province of Westland out of Canterbury, and Southland (for a brief inglorious decade) out of Otago. In 1932 W. P. Morrell produced the pioneer history of the provincial system. When he wrote, there were no satisfactory histories available of any of the ten provinces. In 1964 Professor Morrell's history of the provincial system was republished by Whitcombe & Tombs; in the thirty-odd years

An address delivered on 18 February 1965 to the N.Z.L.A. Conference in Christchurch. Mr May, Lecturer in History at the University of Canterbury, is author of *The West Coast Gold Rushes* (Christchurch, 1962) and *Hokitika, Goldfields Capital* (Christchurch, 1964).

¹ K. Sinclair, *The Maori Land League* (Auckland, 1950), p.3.

between the two editions of this book only two provincial histories, satisfying the requirements of the academic historian, were written: A. D. McIntosh's *Marlborough* and A. H. McLintock's *History of Otago*. It seems incredible that some ninety years after the provincial system was finally abolished we should still be waiting for sound provincial histories of Auckland, Taranaki, Hawke's Bay, Wellington, Nelson, Westland, Canterbury and Southland.

Below the provincial level the picture changes. Regional and local histories have been produced in abundance and every year some local patriot seeks to convince us that everything of significance in New Zealand history happened beyond the Waimakariri or in Amuri County, at Whangarei or on the banks of the Wakamarina, in Hamilton or at Hokitika. These innumerable local histories vary considerably in quality from W. J. Gardner's scholarly *The Amuri* to those better-be-nameless "scissors and paste" compilations which read like old telephone directories, which are so often unreliable, which are commonly uncritical, which are usually undocumented and which are frequently unrelated to the mainstream of our national life. Much that has been written in local history will have to be written again, and here I want to catch the ear and rap the knuckles of the local librarian.

My great fear is that through carelessness, neglect, lack of imagination and foresight, much of the raw material of local history will be lost to us. In default of the private collector, or the interested local historian, or the itinerant agent on behalf of a national library, who is to preserve the raw material of history in your locality? The local librarian must be prepared to shoulder this burden. You can, very easily, spend your working lives dispensing Frederick J. Thwaites and Ian Fleming; you can devote yourself entirely to guiding the local borrower through the *Corridors of Power* with Lewis Eliot, or help him find *Room at the Top* with John Braine, or even *Hang on a Minute Mate* with Barry Crump; but meanwhile the real stuff of life and history is slipping through your fingers: down the road Mrs Smith has just given great-aunt's diary of the voyage to New Zealand to the kids for a scribbling block; the local timber mill is destroying its older records to make room for a new adding machine; the Borough Council is helping fill the rubbish tip with the rate books 1876-1900; old Grandma Peabody has died at last and kind friends of the deceased have "tidied up", burning, in the process, a trunkful of early sketches, grandad's diary of a prospecting tour in the 1860's and a copy of the family tree.

You think I am dramatising unnecessarily? Let me give you some specific examples drawn from my West Coast experience and you'll understand the bitter tears I've shed at Charleston and Brighton, Okarito and Ross, in Westport and Hokitika.

Westport's pioneer newspaper, *The Westport Times*, established December 1866. The entire issue for the year December 1866-

December 1867 no longer exists; said to have been sold to a ragman.

The *Grey River Argus*, Greymouth's pioneer newspaper, established November 1865. In 1953 when I worked on my thesis the first six months of the *Argus* issue were available in Greymouth, though nowhere else. In 1960 I attempted to use these vital early files when working on my book. Vanished. Nothing earlier than about April 1866.

Photographs, Hokitika. In 1962 I inspected a collection of early plates held by a Hokitika resident. The collection was clearly incomplete. Did he know where the other plates might be? Indeed he did. He remembered vividly how boxes of photographic plates were, after a spring-cleaning, dumped on the Hokitika beach and how the local lads used them for coconut shies.

Reefton. Miscellaneous collection of early documents including files of the *Inangahua Herald*. Buried in a gigantic grave dug by a bulldozer.

Ross. Complete file of the old paper *The Ross and Okarito Advocate*. Tidied up by a former town clerk and placed in the loft of a shed. The shed no longer exists—likewise the papers.

Kaniere. A few months ago an old resident of Kaniere died. She possessed a unique collection of early Kaniere photographs. Relatives very kindly tidied her belongings and burnt the entire collection.

One or two further examples of near losses and potential losses:

About 1961 I interviewed a son of James Alexander Bonar, whose career was intimately tied to the history of Westland from 1865 till his death in 1902. The son was an old man living a hermit's life in a little hut well up the Hokitika Valley. He possessed diaries, letters, photographs and other valuable material. He died a few months after I saw him. Nobody attempted to salvage the Bonar records and finally, unable to trace their whereabouts and in desperation, I tried the Public Trust in Hokitika. A warm welcome: "Take the damn things away, we don't know what to do with them." And I walked off with a bulging suitcase of Bonar Papers. Now upstairs in the Canterbury Museum Archives.

There's a publican in Ross and his pub is one of the oldest in town. He possesses an order book beginning in 1867 and full of fascinating material for the social historian. He produces it to entertain the tourist, but he won't part with it. Neither pub nor publican will stay forever. . . .

The Ross Borough Council possesses full records of its history and a series of Minute Books extending back to No. 1 (1876); housed in an ancient wooden building which is also the local library. What will become of these records?

In conclusion, may I offer a five-point programme for the local librarian:

1. Stimulate interest in the history of your locality by displays of photographs, sketches, journals, newspapers, diaries. Such a display may elicit further material.
2. Study the obituary column in the local newspaper and sound out the relatives of the late lamented old identity.
3. Photograph or photo-copy any material of value in private hands and likely to remain there.
4. Look especially for the following: files of the pioneer local newspaper; records of a local body or society, institution or industry; old letters, diaries and journals; maps, sketches and early photographs.
5. *Disarm* the enthusiastic local researcher who sets to work on your existing records with pencil in one hand and razor-blade in the other.

To follow this programme, ladies and gentlemen, will, I know, require both time and money. I can't offer you these, but my advice is free.